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VOL. XXIX
NO. 3
SPRING 1980
ONE DOLLAR

Four
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Quarters





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Four Quarters

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SPRING, 1980

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The Only Game

CARL LINDNER

Look at it this way—
all of a sudden
you find yourself
near a schoolyard
and you can't tell
just how good
is the guy out there,
shooting and dribbling;
before you know it
you're in a game
of one-on-one
and it's his ball out
and the rules
keep changing
and he won't let on
when or how
and every time
you ask the score
there's that grin.
You'd feel better
if you could see
his eyes, but sun-
light keeps
shining behind his head
no matter where you go
and all you see are teeth.

Three American Primitives

AUSTIN HUGHES

MERIWETHER LEWIS AT GRINDER'S INN

Louisiana Territory, 1809

(Three years after returning with his journey of exploration with William Clark, Meriwether Lewis shot himself at an inn on the Natchez Trace.)

It had rained for days as we floated down that eerie river,
often in a fog so thick we could see neither bank.
We would camp at night among tangled berry-vines
and try to sleep
listening to the geese and ducks
chatter and bicker all night on their crowded sandbars;
or we'd stay awake, killing fleas.
There were rude tribes here,
the women with naked buttocks
and slimy ulcers on their lips.
They fed on roots and fish.
They stole our peace-pipe when we smoked with them;
their speech was strange even to Sacajawea.

It was November seventh in late morning
when the fog cleared, and we saw water across the horizon.
After that one expansive instant,
our only goal was flight;
flight from the current coaxing us outward
into the danger zone of waves and cliffs;
flight from the rain;
flight from the buffalo blackflies
swooping on every patch of bare skin,
drinking our blood,
stinging each bite with their bitter spit;
flight from the Mandans' wooden masks,

horribly distorted,
portraying, I reckon, death-throes;
flight from the hieroglyphs—
pictures of lone eyes,
of men with antlers—
painted on rocks along both sides of the Missouri.

To what?
For me, to this room.
To the reassuring pressure on my chest
of the thing that will do
what the Snake River rapids
and the panthers
and the Minatarees
overlooked.

THOMAS SAY AT NEW HARMONY

New Harmony, Indiana, 1826

(Lacking a steady source of income. Thomas Say, the father of North American entomology and malacology, was persuaded by friends to take up residence at a short-lived Utopian settlement in Indiana.)

For now I can forget the New Moral Order
and the blisters on my hands
from my hateful garden labor;
I've managed to get away
for one bright afternoon
out onto the prairie—
out of earshot of the bickering,
gossip, shouts, and laughter
of my perfected neighbors.
All I hear is a vesper sparrow
whistling from a buckbrush twig
and grasshoppers' intermittent buzzes,
while my eyes are charmed by a thousand lowly creatures,
each one content with his own affair:

a gray weevil
with his snout,
as long as he is,
poked in an aster-disk;
an ambush-bug waiting,
his fat dukes up;
a black ground-beetle stumbling
down his crazy trail among the grass-roots.

Such beings never laugh
at my ridiculous costume,
this New Man uniform—
tight blue monkey jacket,
baggy white pantaloons.
They've never heard of Mister Robert Owen
or his theories.

So, though my poverty keeps me here
with no hope of escape,
I can be content
as I was in childhood
when, my parents quarreling,
I scampered out,
found such a place as this,
and steeped my mind in an inhuman knowledge.

To-Kah-Na's Spirit-Quest

Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, 1842

(The Methodist Episcopal Society maintained
a manual labor school for young Indians of
various nations at Fort Leavenworth.)

The melting snow is black from the soot of the chimneys.
I breathe air coarse with their smoke.
The winter fire has burned a long time in this house.
I have no spirit-helper.
I look into the white men's windows,
but I do not recognize the face of any of their charms.

I will go where hawbushes grow by a high cold spring
on a part of earth the white men have not surrounded.

My back to the dwellings,
I will show my skin to the thorns.
I will return like a stag,
with his first antlers testy as quick.

Where did I learn this pathway?
Was it while running in a dream?
My eyes on the branches above me,
I trace the footing of sly ravens.
I step on the hunting grounds of skunks and foxes.
I flush quail wide around me.

Bear.
Wolverine.
Come.
It is you that are shy of me.
I can stroke you.
I can open your mouths.
Lynx, I can touch your teeth
and mock your voice to your face.
I know your tricks.
A father, asked about the past,
has the same dissembled purr.
A quick look stolen at a brother's face
shows all that stealth,
even to the subtlest baring.

None of the others will know what I have found here.
I will laugh alone at my own jokes.
It's not what I expected, I will tell them;
none of this is what I had foreseen.
And only sometimes, if I need to sing,
I'll wail a soft, unasked for wail
before their uncaring faces
like a screech owl when the whole forest listens
for a moment,
then settles back and forgets,
reassured,
like a cry of carrion hunger in the snow.

Tumbling

THOMAS D. OWEN

JANET CAMDEN FOUND the green styrofoam owls piled behind the furnace. She gathered them in her arms and marched up the basement steps. In the den her father sat sullenly before the blue quiet of the television set. Janet dropped the owls in a heap at his feet.

"These are the last ones, Dad. The plastic clasps are in the box."

She tapped him on the arm and pointed to a small box next to the couch. Major Camden dipped his shoulder. He hid his face like a little boy.

"No thank you, dear," he said bleakly, "I don't want to fiddle with those damn birds now."

"But we're almost finished."

Janet stepped over her father's outstretched legs. She grabbed a clasp and attached it to one of the owls. She repeated the process. Major Camden quietly sighed.

"With the hole already made, the clasps go in real easily." Janet grinned at her father. "Don't you think?"

He wagged his tongue under his nose. His left eye disappeared beneath the socket's horizon. Janet cringed. The cloudy white sickened her. It brought to mind curdled milk. With bloody rivulets.

"Stop it, Dad," she demanded.

Major Camden playfully pinched his tongue and the eye popped up. He patted his daughter's hand. Laughing uncomfortably, Janet placed one of the owls in her father's lap. He carelessly splintered its mid-section with a clasp. A malodorous green fluid rolled off his hand.

"No wonder the squirrels don't like it," he grimaced. "This stuff stinks to high hell."

Major Camden flipped the damaged owl into the wastebasket. He stood up and slowly walked to the window. Looking beyond his glum reflection, he saw Chadoir.

"I'll mount the rest of the owls this afternoon," he spoke softly to Janet, without moving from the window.

The Chadoir Missile Base was remote, located in a rock-strewn pasture at the edge of the forest. A pair of picture puzzle homes, the

Camdens' and Colonel Gustafson's, sat just outside its fence. They were the only structures within miles of the base, two small moons to its planet. Myriad high-tension lines snaked through the neighboring trees, connecting Chadoir with a distant sub-station. Squirrels by the hundreds scurried along the thick rubber cords.

JANET NEATLY STACKED the owls at the foot of the couch. She called softly to her father. Major Camden didn't respond. He stood transfixed at the window, watching Chadoir, replaying memories. He'd spent twenty-three years inside its fence. Two years ago he'd been kicked into early retirement, as had Colonel Gustafson. Both men were administrative officers, replaced by young missile-polishing technocrats.

"Dad, I'm going to help Colonel Gustafson with his laundry," Janet shouted across the room. "Do you need any washing done?"

Major Camden stepped back from the window. He rolled his head to one side, as though the dark fog that gripped him would drain through his ear. "Janet, I don't have to tell you that I spend a lot of time, too much in fact, just staring at the base. I think if my eyes were rays, the whole damn place would've melted by now."

"What about laundry? Your yellow pants, are they clean?" she asked.

"Then I could drink it like soup. The underground bunkers, the mess, officers' quarters, the entire place. And then piss it all out and flush it away. No more memories, right?" he said, smiling.

"I found a red sock of yours under the dresser. If you get me the other one I'll wash them together," she said.

Major Camden leaned over and kissed his daughter. He whispered, "Sock? Was there any money in the toe of that sock?"

"Yes," she answered. "I put the change in your drawer." Janet looked expectantly at her father.

"Cigarette change," he said. "I've been trying to quit. I leave it behind the dresser because it hurts my shoulder to reach way under there. If that doesn't work, dipping my fingers into a dirty sock should."

"You smoke more than you ever did," Janet pointed out. He mumbled into his sleeve. She poked him. "What's that? What did you say?"

"Dollar bills, I buy the damn cigarettes with dollar bills," he turned away, embarrassed. "I smoke like an incinerator, still I have forty to fifty bucks in change. I've stretched that sock so much it runs up my thigh."

"What about the other sock?" Janet reminded.

He plucked a book off the coffee table. She glanced at the title

(something about back disorders). When he turned it upside down, a fetid red sock slipped from the back pages. Using her foot, Janet launched it into her laundry basket. It sat atop the wrinkled clothing, a shiny beacon. "I was using it as a bookmark," he said apologetically.

"Are you writing more letters to the General about his wife's back?" She looked suspiciously at her father. "Well?"

Major Camden moved to his favorite spot by the window. He sank an inch or two. As a result of his vigil, he'd worn a depression in the carpet. In a hollow voice: "If she lost some weight, it'd get better. With all that fat there's too much stress on her lower back."

"It's none of our business, Dad, you know that. So she eats like a horse. Even if her back got better, what good would it do? They're not letting you back on the base," she said.

Major Camden closed his eyes. "I can still see her fall. When she hit the floor, she spread out and jiggled. Like fat people do." He hesitated momentarily. His left arm moved up and down, as though he were ringing a huge bell. After the clapper struck, the words tolled out. "She was groaning and spreading on the floor and all I could think of was pancakes. That's how goofy I was at the time. If I'd had a spatula I would've tucked it under and tried to flip her. A lot of good that would've done, huh? A team of sailors with a winch couldn't have budged her!"

"Forget about it. It's not doing you or me any good." Janet was growing impatient. She checked herself. "I'm going to Colonel Gustafson's now. And I don't want you standing in front of that window all afternoon. After you do the owls you can, oh, maybe work on your memoirs," she said teasingly.

"The dreams of your mother color everything, you know that," he answered, shaking his head. "Besides, I'd have to look inside myself." His roaming left iris swam under the upper lid. Turning away, Janet imagined it bobbing in the gray space behind his forehead. She picked up the laundry and stalked out of the room.

HER DEATH surprised no one. Dorothy Camden had been gravely ill for years. Throughout that cheerless period Major Camden had rehearsed the course of his wife's deterioration in his dreams: he and Janet were sitting in chairs at the water's edge, a warm fire by their feet. Dorothy, rigid and pale, glued to her bed, was drifting out to sea. As her condition weakened, she moved further away, all the while pulling energy and light from the fire. Dorothy Camden was a mere shadow when she slipped through a crack in the horizon. And the cold, transparent fire drooped at the toes of her loved ones like a wet sculpture.

The day following her funeral, Major Camden sat despondently

in his office at the ugly green desk where he directed the men's entertainment fund. An inconsequential job, made more so by his wife's death. She'd always been the one to mollify him: "I know that you dislike your present duties, Jonathan. The General no longer uses your talents properly. But remember, you're a very proud man. Who else could order dance bands and dirty movies with such grace?"

"Movies, hell," Major Camden muttered. The bottle fell from his hand. The bourbon formed a gentle lake on the floor. Lightheaded, he leaned forward in his chair. His breathing was labored, like heavy clouds fighting through burlap. A knock at his office door. His stomach burned: hot little fingers walked through his intestines, smoking in the dark passageways. The General's wife walked in, weeping: "Your lovely wife . . . how sad . . . really lovely and so nice . . ." In the midst of her condolences, she slipped in the bourbon, her thick leg upsetting a tall stack of movie cans. Several cans popped open, enshrouding her in film entrails: a blue-movie burial. Major Camden toppled off his chair into a hasty, sad retirement.

FROM COLONEL GUSTAFSON'S BED she looked out the window and saw the chemical owls swaying atop the high-tension lines. The squirrels meticulously avoided them, hopping back and forth between lines. They were too clever for the Army and its mute green sentinels.

Janet sighed, "I wonder if those owls do any good at all?"

"Not much probably," he responded. "They remind me of a couple of drunken old flagmen who worked the switchyard when I was a teenager. After school we'd go down and drink some beer and throw the empties at the train. They hobbled around but could never catch us. After a while they just ignored us. One of them gave me a buck and told me to throw at cars instead."

Colonel Gustafson swung his legs around and bounced out of bed, using his hands as springs. He hastily drew on his underwear as though it were hot. "Is your dad about finished putting up the owls?" he asked.

"We're down to the last half-dozen or so. There must be two or three hundred up already." She added hesitantly, "For all the good they do. The squirrels just play hopscotch around them. But it's kept dad busy, that's the important thing."

"Right you are." Colonel Gustafson plucked his pants from the chair. Janet leaned from the bed and began kissing his knee. He gently pushed her away. "Stop it now, my pants don't go on with your head there. That's enough Janet, my knees tickle, come now," he giggled. "If you could wag your tail I'd send you out for the

newspaper.”

“You would, huh?” Turning on her stomach, she motioned him to rub her back. Her laughing shoulders shook the bed.

“My pleasure.” He gripped her sides and moved his sun-baked nose the length of her spine. “I’m very good with nose rubs. Does it feel like the padded paw of a gentle bear? That’s what people have told me,” he whispered.

“Feels good, Gus. Very relaxing,” she said. “Maybe you could get some work on the General’s wife.”

“Ummm, I’ll let your father take care of that, I think.” He paused momentarily, his nose carving throughways above Janet’s kidneys. “I don’t know if I ever told you, but I saw the accident. Its result anyway. Mrs. Wiley flopping about on the floor, covered with film. A terrible mess. Between Lieutenant Chapman and the others, I figured I’d never hear the end to the ticker tape whale jokes.”

“How awful,” she said distantly. In a stronger voice, “What did you mean ‘I’ll let your father take care of that’?”

“He’s still sending notes to the General about his wife’s back condition. You realized that, didn’t you? He’d do anything to get back on the base, even run the movies again.”

“I know. With the owls running out I’ll have to come up with a project for him. He becomes more and more like a little boy every day.”

“Your father was a good soldier. Still is. Much better than me. I was never much for the shiny buttons and square corners. I pinched my way up through influential wives,” Gustafson clucked. He began singing in Janet’s ear. The song was about the glowing rainbows in her hair.

MAJOR CAMDEN was hunched over his desk, at work on a note to the General: “. . . near completion of the owl campaign. The squirrels seem fairly active but has most of the short-circuiting stopped? Do the missile cantilevers raise without problems? If necessary I might rig up a man-sized cardboard owl and climb up there with a large stick, knock the little bastards off the wire . . . Is Mrs. Wiley feeling better yet? I’ve done some reading and with bigger people they sometimes suspend them in water with tent-like corsets. That helps their back. Are the movies going well? I’d be happy to help out . . .” Dozens of cigarettes smoldered in the wastebasket at his feet. Major Camden automatically reached for another one. It rolled down his fingers, and after bouncing off his leg, settled upright in the cat’s sandbox. Again he reached for his pack of cigarettes, but this time it was empty. Before he could act, the cat picked the wayward cigarette in his jaws and hustled under

the couch. Major Camden fell down on his hands and knees. "Here kitty, give me the cigarette. I mean it," he hissed, the spittle breaking against his teeth. Yawning, the cat batted the cigarette between its paws. Major Camden angrily upended the couch. He accidentally stepped on the cigarette, snapping it in half. The cat pranced away like a movie star.

COLONEL GUSTAFSON carefully folded the laundry. "Just about finished, Janet. I pressed a couple of your shirts and hung them in the closet. Remember when you leave." He held her father's red sock to the light. "Has your dad been fielding stray dogs with these?"

Janet drowsily checked her fingernails. "Thanks for your help, Gus."

"Let me fix you some dinner before you go. Some pot roast, baked potatoes, cooked carrots. Sound good?"

"Sounds great," she said. "But I have to fix Dad his dinner. I can't leave him alone too long." She looked up at the ceiling. "I haven't had pot roast in ages."

"Like everyone's mother used to make it," he said.

"I don't remember Mom ever cooking it. By the time I could see over the top of her bed she was always in it. Too sick to cook."

"She was a heavenly cook. When we were on the base I all but ordered your dad to invite me to dinner. Her roast was gorgeous. It sang in your stomach."

"Dad did most of the cooking when she was sick," she said.

"He's not much in the kitchen." Gustafson rubbed her neck and shoulders. When she looked up he waved his tongue derisively. "Strangled a few meatloaf."

"It's hard talking to someone who's sick, isn't it?" When he nodded, Janet continued. "When they're lying in bed, feeling awful. Just staring at the ceiling like they're expecting something to pop through."

Gustafson frowned. "It's not easy saying the right thing. The person might be too sick to listen anyway."

"Dad didn't know what to say to her."

"Oh?"

"He ran wild instead," she said sadly. "Opening windows, shutting them seconds later, racing around with cold washrags and kleenex, constantly making sandwiches she never ate."

Colonel Gustafson was commiserative, "I do remember those sandwiches." In his mind's eye he saw them littered about the bedroom like old books.

"He tried so hard," Janet choked. "But he couldn't help her." She

bent her head and wept. Colonel Gustafson watched the rain rolling across the base.

THE THUNDER startled Major Camden. He sat up in bed and listened. The rain blew in through his open window, soaking the clothes that hung from his broken ironing board. The disorientation that held him slipped away when he reached for his pants. He hurried downstairs, scooping up the remaining owls and an aluminum ladder from the garage.

As he scampered by the window, he noticed the cat perched elegantly atop his reading lamp. Only minutes before, the selfsame cat had robbed his afternoon dream: Major Camden had discovered him lounging about the waterfront of his subconscious while he and Janet scanned the empty horizon. The furry wastrel was sunning himself, his paws skyward, a bevy of Mrs. Camden's jewelry draped around his midsection, puffing cigarettes with the lip-smacking arrogance of a Persian prince. Major Camden decided then and there to thrash the cat should he ever again turn his memory of Dorothy into an animal cartoon.

He placed his head through the ladder's rungs, balancing it on his shoulders so he could carry the owls in one trip. He sailed across the lawn, the water filling his eyes and nose, and the wind forcing him to tack as it played the ladder. When he finally reached the power pole he was exhausted. But he'd finish with the owls today, just as he'd promised.

The foul weather made his climb difficult. At the top he cautiously removed his belt and snapped it at an unsuspecting squirrel. While the poor creature barely dodged the whip, Major Camden lost his pants to the ankles and his balance to the wind. Lunging for the wire, he grabbed a strang of naked copper. A lethal number of volts sprinted through his body, throwing him fifteen feet to the ground, unbreathing. The ladder fell on top of him. Its rungs framed his helpless, blue-cheeked stare.

The kitchen lights flickered momentarily. "Probably the wind," Janet shrugged. Colonel Gustafson shoveled the leftover pieces of roast into the bag. He handed it to Janet. "Here. You can make your dad a cold sandwich. If you heat it don't leave it in too long. Knocks the flavor right out of it."

LIEUTENANT CHAPMAN slammed on the brakes. He and the general jumped from the car and ran down the embankment. "Oh Lord, it's Camden. Get the ladder off him!" General Wiley dropped to his knees and began resuscitating him. He leaned back, caught his breath, and repeated the process, a

second and a third time. "He's regaining it, I think. There's some color there," the General panted. Major Camden's naked legs wiggled in the wet grass. His face melted. His eyes were wild horses.

Mrs. Wiley, her back fitted with a steel brace, stepped gingerly from the car. She squeaked with concern, "Is that Major Camden? Is he all right, I hope? Maybe you could pull up his pants." She sidled too close to the edge of the embankment, her foot slipped, and she tumbled out of control. Acting quickly, Chapman grabbed the General's arm and threw him aside. The rolling lady came to rest atop Major Camden. His newly-found wind took off like frightened birds.

"Good God, Helen, the man can't breathe!" the General screamed. He and Chapman tugged at her. She groaned hideously. "Run up to the car and look for the rope!" he yelled at Chapman.

Major Camden succumbed to a gentle delirium. His eye floated into its secret pool. He imagined himself buried beneath a crumbling hangar, a steel crane mounted on its roof.

Chapman found the rope in the trunk. Snickering, he attached it to the rear axle.

Arabesque

LOUIS HASLEY

Starting low on long firm stems
red-fringed gladiolus bells take slow
shape, peeling in garden suburbs
where butterflies reel along
melodic avenues. By the time
the top bells ring, reverberations
of the lowest have fallen silent to the
plucking hand. The time is sequential,
yet seen from some impossible dimension
all would sound together, and a less
limited eye would hear them all
at once, a floral bell-harness
publishing arabesque arms of
pink and red tints chiming into
silence and wonder.

A Completed Transaction

DONALD PURCELL

RAY FLAGG WAS seventeen-and-a-half when Orlo Strother first hailed him in a bullhorn voice on a busy Saturday morning in Cyrene. At his "Hey, Ray, how's it going?"—the first time an adult, a well-known adult, had drawn attention to him on Main Street—it seemed to Ray as if all eyes coalesced into one huge pitiless stare. He managed a scarlet nod of pleasure towards Orlo, but then he had to look down. He kept his head lowered all the way to join his father in the pickup at Cyrene Hay and Feed.

When Ray trotted or skated out with whatever Cyrene High team he happened to be leading, few would have guessed that he was shy. When people asked him about girl friends and parties, he flashed a well-trained grin that usually stopped their asking more; it made them suppose that his private social life was as brilliant as his public athletic life. But he was really only at ease with anyone besides relatives when he joined others in rhythmic, exhausting, time-digesting motions on the farm or the playing field.

Yet, during the week after Orlo had hailed him in Cyrene, Ray felt a fiery prospective excitement about going back there for the usual Saturday morning load of grain sacks. As the year wore on and he continued starring in games, he accustomed himself to suffering the conflicting emotions that Orlo's shouts set off within him, and at moments he even felt at ease in Cyrene's business streets.

After his eighteenth birthday in June, a new driver's license in his wallet, Ray announced to his father—who shrugged assent—that it was now time for him to drive to Cyrene alone. He felt that he had entered on a new stage in life, and that this was visible to others. Nevertheless, when Orlo whooped to him from a screened window in the diner up the street, he wanted to melt into the pavement. His breath stopped, he managed to look up; Orlo beckoned to him with flapping gestures of his long white sleeves.

Orlo said that the boy who usually chauffeured for him had just left town for a spot on a minor-league baseball team. Would Ray like to chauffeur for him?

Ray, like everyone else in the county, had to be reminded that

Orlo wore a gleaming leg brace, that the other leg dragged, and that he walked with the aid of a steel cane equipped with an elbow support. Ray mumbled that he'd like the job.

When he called for Orlo that night at the Old Cyrene Brick Hotel, Orlo insisted on showing him his room off the lobby where he had just hung two bedsheet-size tapestries he'd paid two hundred dollars apiece for in the city. The tapestries troubled Ray, but he was unable to look away from them: one was of a desert scene—half moon, a pyramid, and a lion—the other of a cluttered foreign-looking interior in which a naked woman lounged on a divan. The woman was decorated with three sequins the size of fifty-cent pieces. Ray stared at the tapestries; they seemed to him the new world into which, whether or not he liked, it was now his time to step. Numbly he followed Orlo outside to Orlo's Buick.

Orlo had Ray drive on unfamiliar roads parallelling the St. Lawrence River. As the Buick rolled silently along, Orlo smoked a cigar and explained why the Braves weren't in first place. After ten miles Ray's nervousness gave way to contentment with the companionship of an adult.

Orlo had Ray turn into a gravel road hemmed by thick woods. They crossed a plank bridge, rounded a turn, and burst from forest into an open yard lit by strings of bulbs outlining a vast wooden building skirted with turreted verandas. From within, an orchestra blared at the surrounding swampy forest. In respectful silence Ray followed Orlo's tortuous progress through the parking lot and up the veranda steps into a hall hot with shirt-sleeved men. Ray followed the heaving shoulders to a long bar.

"Know this fella?" Orlo asked the bartender in a voice that included a dozen other men to either side. "Ray pitched that no-hitter down in Jefferson County night before last. Drives for me now. Give him what he asks for. Charge me. If he asks for shrimp, give him shrimp. Turkey, give him turkey."

Ray both heard and didn't hear. He gazed at a brilliantly lit glass cylinder of liquid in which fat bubbles wobbled up and then descended, the color changing every few seconds. A door banged open somewhere; the reek of frying meat stupefied him.

Orlo rapped, "Ray, you stay here or not, as you please. Take the Buick—only be back at two, maybe three, to pick me up, o.k.? Don't buy no gas, o.k.? Here's for driving." Orlo stretched clumsily at Ray, tucked a bill into his shirt pocket, and stumped off into the crowd towards the el where the orchestra played.

Though he felt abandoned, Ray grinned mechanically at the bartender, who slid him a beer. The man beside him grumbled to him. Ray didn't understand a word. Fingers shaking, he gulped his beer and hurried out. In the Buick he fell asleep until three in the

morning, when the bartender woke him. Inside, he found Orlo Strother stretched flat on a wide bench in the men's room.

Back in Cyrene, Ray, disturbed because there was no one up to ask what to do, walked for ten minutes around the car, up the hotel steps, and back around the car. Finally he decided that he was supposed to carry Orlo to one of the sofas in Orlo's room, which was never locked. He quickly did so and fled home.

After a few more sorties Ray conversed, though briefly, at the bar. Then one evening he met a guy, also from Cyrene High, with whom he felt comfortable and who suggested that they drive to a miniature golf course and then to a late movie. Orlo must like Ray a lot, Ray's new friend remarked, to let him drive around in the Buick without buying gas and to put a twenty-dollar bill in his pocket each time.

Ray shrugged. He did not want to speak of it.

After the movie his friend said that Orlo probably liked making friends with athletes because he couldn't be an athlete himself. Turning away, Ray mumbled that he guessed so. Within, he felt the same hot, wringing discomfort that he felt when he was in a new place where people might look at him. He didn't like wondering why Orlo liked him.

He told his family at lunch that Orlo was the most intelligent man he'd ever known even if he did drink a little. Later, in the barn, catching an amused glint in his father's eye, he realized that he'd been walking from cow to cow with a limp, as if he were a cripple.

Ray enjoyed the most wonderful midsummer weeks of his life; when he batted at night games it was wonderful hearing Orlo in the stands; and afterwards, reviving from the fatigue of the match, it was wonderful driving Orlo over the familiar empty roads. Now Cyrene was a place where he forgot his shyness, and he looked for excuses to drive there on errands.

But one night in late summer everything began to change. At a fireman's field day he said to his friend that it was time to get back. "No hurry," his friend said, "the old drunk won't stagger off anywhere."

The word rang in Ray's mind all the way back to the bar. When he met the barkeeper, waiting for him in the now-empty bar, Ray said, "Time to pick up the old drunk." He liked the feeling of having said it.

"He's been lucky," the barman remarked, leading the way to the men's room, "always finding young guys who'll take care of him. Likes boasting about knowing all the ball players. They couldn't stop him talking tonight."

After Ray had lugged Orlo to his sofa in the Brick Hotel, he stood for some seconds in mid-floor, hand on the light cord. The

room smelled sickeningly stuffy—something he'd never noticed before. Speculatively he regarded the bottle-shaped nude. "Huh!" he snorted, hearing with satisfaction his own exclamation.

RAY'S FATHER SENT HIM the next forenoon to Cyrene to Orlo's bank to cash the milk check of two hundred and seventy-two dollars. Parking by the bank, Ray felt a glow of superiority—as if Orlo were now to be his customer.

In the bank, murmuring answers to greetings, Ray took his place in the line of a dozen men inching their way respectfully up to Orlo's window. Check curled tenderly in the cup of his hand, Ray sensed the general hushed attention, an atmosphere controlled by successive resounding eruptions of Orlo's voice, though Orlo himself, behind his window, was visible only to those close to him. They wouldn't all be standing so respectful, Ray thought, if they'd hauled Orlo to bed at four that morning, as he'd done; and he felt the sensation he often felt in the locker room after a game towards the players that he and his team had just beaten. Hands on hips, he eyed the printed sign beside Orlo's window: "Transaction Completed When Customer Leaves Window."

"Cecil?" Orlo's voice assailed the man ahead of Ray. The man bent into Orlo's window frame, so Ray couldn't catch what the farmer whispered. But after each pause in the man's whispering, Orlo resoundingly enunciated every word the man had just said as if he were verifying a dictation of the man's bank statement.

In a fraction of a second Ray's new confidence collapsed. A minute from now Orlo would boom his name and add personal remarks! Orlo would even proclaim the sum of the family milk check—not one of the bigger ones. Everyone in the bank would look at him and eye one another. Ray froze.

The farmer's back seemed whisked from the window. A voice roused him, "Ray?"

Ray forced a step forward and tried to grin. He felt Orlo's eyes scan him mechanically as Orlo plucked the check from his inert hand. Orlo flicked the check back to Ray. "No countersign," Orlo announced to the room in a tone that signalled that here was a greenhorn. Ray touched the check with his forefinger. He felt his lips move; no words came out. Orlo's stare, that of a stranger now, was a searchlight, a torment.

The man behind Ray huffed wetly: "Sign the back, Ray."

When Ray had managed this, Orlo grated, "Always use your middle initial, Ray?"

Ray couldn't remember whether or not he usually signed that way.

Orlo's bullfrog croaks echoed: "Two hundred seventy-two,

Ray." He stamped the check with a thud and dealt out bills in a single machine-like ripple. Ray clutched the bills and dashed out to the pickup. After he'd stared through the windshield for five minutes at the wall of the bank, he breathed more easily and remembered that he was supposed to count the money.

After the first count he started at the brick wall again. Then, fingers racing, he counted the money a second time and a third time—three hundred and seventy-two dollars. There were two extra fifty-dollar bills.

His earlier sensation of triumph swelled again. He contemplated and rehearsed what he'd say. Then he sauntered back into the bank, where he enjoyed waiting in line.

"Ray, back again?" Orlo's voice stabbed tolerantly.

"Yeah. Say, Mr. Strother, that check—there's been a slight mistake—"

The rasp stopped him. "Transaction completed when customer leaves the window." Orlo reached a long arm forward, angling his wrist to indicate the sign.

Ray hadn't expected this. Once again his confidence vanished. "I know about that, only—"

"Transaction completed when customer leaves window." The statement chopped time like a referee's whistle. "Next? Harold?" Orlo seemed to see the next customer through Ray.

Ray stood balanced by opposing currents of rage and of shame.

"Ray?" Orlo's voice commanded him as if it were the coach's hand clapping his elbow to push him through the pattern of a new play. Ray walked tamely out, hating himself.

Then his feelings coalesced into flaming rage. He speeded dangerously to the feed store and then home. Back at the barn he was unaware of stacking the heavy sacks, hitching the stone boat to the tractor, and driving out to trail his father ploughing. As he wrestled boulders to the platform of the stone boat, hands thick with mud, he did not see what he did; his mind kept flashing images of Orlo: Orlo eating a lobster, Orlo at a diner booth, Orlo's head and shoulders in the teller's window. Ray felt himself crash headforemost at the bluish heavy-skinned face; he butted his helmeted head on through the window the way he'd butt through a fissure in the line a yard from the goal.

Before lunch, in his room, he put the fifty-dollar bills in a brown envelope which also contained every report card he'd received since first grade. He slid the envelope back under a pile of clean shirts. But he couldn't forget. He did not speak until afternoon milking time when he asked his father, "Dad, that check this morning, it was for two hundred and seventy-two, wasn't it?"

His father nodded.

"That's what I gave hay and feed. But, see, Orlo Strother gave me three hundred and seventy-two."

"So that's what you been so quiet about: Ray, it's nothing to get upset about."

"I'm not upset."

"'dyou give it back to him?"

"I took it back, and I go, 'There's been a mistake,' and he cuts me off like he never seen me before. He goes, 'Transaction completed when customer leaves window,' like on that little sign he's got there."

His father guffawed. "He'll be out here seeing you! It'll do him good. Maybe quiet him down for a while."

"It may seem funny to some people," Ray grumbled as he settled the container under a cow. And the paralyzing confusion that had made him feel helpless when Orlo commanded him to leave the bank overcame him again.

After supper he didn't join the others before the TV. In his room he reached for the envelope and sat on his bed. The two fifties were there, all right; he placed them on his knees.

He heard a car drive into the yard. He froze. The car door slammed; Orlo's voice rumbled. His father opened the stairway door. Ray jumped and feverishly stowed the money back under the shirts. He stretched out on his bed.

"Orlo Strother's here," his father called. "Wants to talk."

"I don't feel good."

"Can you come down a second? Wants to ask about next Saturday night after the game."

"He don't want to see me more than anyone else!"

The kitchen door clapped shut. Orlo's car hummed off.

His father came up. "Says he paid it out of his own pocket."

"He—he—" Ray stammered. After a minute some words came to mind that gave shape to the cloudiness of this thought. He exclaimed, "He's much's accused me of coming back to claim money that wasn't ours. Like I'm a thief. I don't think much of a man who'd do that to a young guy who don't know about banks. In public!"

"Do him good, Ray, to have some one stand up to him for a change."

The incident twisted in his mind during most of the night. As if he were there, he saw Orlo lying on his back, mouth open, on the men's room bench. The barkeeper and his quiet friend—Ray *heard* them—talked of what a fool he'd be if he ever gave a cent back to Orlo. A minute later he remembered Orlo's echoing "Hey, Ray!" on Main Street. He *heard* the friendliness and he wanted to rush into town, wake Orlo, and give back the bills. Then he stood in the bank, pinned by Orlo's fixed regard.

Then, abruptly, mist suffused his mind. Images of Orlo and of his friends were replaced by that of the two fifty-dollar bills lying forever on his knees. Yes, he would pass his life seated on his bed, the money before him, and he would never either spend it or give it back to Orlo. He felt a lovely dreamless sleep draining him of concern.

ALONE, RAY POUNDED fence posts in the field bordering the county road. A car stopped. He recognized a Buick fender. Then, between thuds of the maul he heard the scrape and rustle of Orlo waddling up the bank to him. When he felt Orlo standing beside him, he let the maul down, turned, and pretended surprise. "Oh, hi, Orlo."

A moment after he'd spoken, he realized that for the first time he'd addressed Orlo by his first name.

"Busy Saturday night?" Orlo asked.

Ray stared down into Orlo's wide face. "Saturday? Don't know yet."

"Say, Ray, guess I miscounted last week."

"Mr. Strother, I give you your chance. 'n Transaction Completed,' I say." He had rehearsed these words in bed.

"Right. Second time in sixteen years I made a mistake. Ray—you keep that hundred, if that's what's on your mind, o.k.?"

In all Ray's obsessive thinking, he had not once supposed that Orlo would tell him to keep the money. Instantly he became as shy as ever. "I don't want your money," he said, his voice becoming suddenly weak.

Orlo said, "Driving's hard for me, as you know."

Ray stammered, "I'll call you about Saturday"; and he fled twelve feet down the line to the next post. He did not stop hammering the post until after he'd heard Orlo drive away.

In the morning he rested his hand on the telephone receiver for five minutes before lifting it. When Orlo answered, Ray blurted that he'd be busy that Saturday night and hung up. He hurried to the barn exhilarated for having made the call.

As he did chores Orlo's mistake turned in his mind, but it no longer tired him or kept him from enjoying the day. At a certain moment he knew what he would do about it, knew as clearly as he knew what plays to call when the team was near the goal. He put down his hay fork and went to the milk room, where he asked his father if he could drive to Cyrene that afternoon.

When Ray appeared at the window, Orlo, alone, hunched over slips of paper, looked up blankly.

"Want to talk with you," Ray said.

Orlo lumbered up and led Ray to the cubicle where, over a

polished cherry table, he discussed mortgages. Ray, following, eyed with astonishment Orlo's shiny painful-looking brace and cane. He'd seen them before; yet he'd never seen them before. After he'd settled into the chair opposite Orlo, Ray asked, "What you think I'm here for, Orlo?"

"Wouldn't know." Orlo, his face blue, looked away.

Ray placed the two fifty-dollar bills on the polished table.

Orlo glanced at them. "Like I told you, Ray, they're yours."

"Correct," Ray said. "Because of what the sign says. They're mine, all right."

Orlo didn't speak.

"Only I want you to have 'em back." Ray savoured a histrionic pleasure that he'd always envied in others but hadn't supposed he'd ever achieve. His controlled firmness of tone thrilling him, Ray went on. "Orlo Strother, you called an honest man a crook in a public place. You took advantage of me bein's I'm young. You're no good. You're a miserable money bags. You're lower than spread cow manure. You're, ah" Ray stopped, panting. He groped mentally for lists of insults he'd endlessly drawn up.

Seeing Orlo's cheeks quiver, he regained breath. "You're a goddam drunken useless man; a hypocrite; you're useless; you're an alcoholic addick; you're—" Ray went dry again.

This time when the certainty came back Ray intoned with solemnity, "You're a son of a bitch!"

Standing, Ray commanded "Take it! I want to watch you reach for your goddamned filthy money!"

Orlo's long arm darted out; he snatched the bills and thrust them into his shirt pocket.

Ray contemplated him. The idea of dashing Orlo's face into the table top with his fists brought with it a flood of savage pleasure, a keenness whose purity he'd never before experienced. But he did not do it. He stalked out and walked forcefully up the streets towards the corners at the center of Cyrene.

"Hi, Ray!" someone cried from the interior of the diner. Ray turned to stare, unmoving, at the figure who waved from beyond the screen door. He remained motionless and silent until the man moved away.

He took in the familiar main street—the bank, the diner, the garage, all Cyrene, its buildings now like toys. He became King Kong; he took up the Cyrene diner in his left hand and hurled it at the toy bank; both buildings bounced out of sight. He squeezed the garage in his fist; it crackled, a brittle hollow thing. He stepped on a passerby, a farmer who often played cards with his father; to his foot the man's body felt like a fat potato bug popping.

Ray strode back to the bank parking lot. Three times he drove

the pickup, noisily and viciously, around the green.

As he drove home, his rage drained to apathy. He stopped the pickup. He caught himself staring at a clump of maples on a rise and wondering where he was. Slowly the trees acquired familiarity. Why, it was Vinicor's sugar bush, one of their favorite spots, the halfway place between Cyrene and home!

He thought he heard a man panting; he recognized that it was he.

He felt a desperation new to him, an emptiness so bleak that he could not for another instant endure sitting still. He turned the starter, gripped the wheel, and engaged the clutch so abruptly that the tires screamed as the pickup bucked forward. In a minute the unfolding movement of passing fields lulled him; yet he feared the return of that unbearable new loneliness; it followed him close, and if he let the pickup slow, it would envelop him again.

He drove faster and faster. Now his thoughts succeeded one another with emotionless precision as consequent as the movements of hands, arms, and feet operating the pickup. He thought of—as if he'd really accomplished it—having battered Orlo's head and destroyed Cyrene.

This savage pleasure, this all-enveloping, battering, swift-invading mood would possess him at times, he knew, for the rest of his life. It was, he recognized, as natural to him as the intoxicating oneness he felt with the team during an overwhelming attack. But now that he'd no longer be on teams, it would become unruly; it would shake him as a runaway motor shakes a machine, vibrating to an explosion; in glories of hatred it would overcome him in bars with other farmers, on the street in Cyrene with policemen, and now that he'd lost his shyness, in strange rooms with women.

He galloped into the barn, where his father wouldn't speak, and where, rhythmically doling armfuls of hay from cow to cow and half-hearing the sleepy background suck-suck of the milking tubes, he knew that for a time at least he would be absorbed back into the happy present of the farm.

The Lightning Bug

PETER KROK

A butt of lemon light winking
in the honeysuckle summer night.

Yussef

M. M. LIBERMAN

YUSSEF THREW OFF his covers, his head still full of the bad sights. He had dreamt his new alarm clock did not work and that he had missed an important class and had been sent home in disgrace to Tripoli to face his father. But the alarm clock worked. It was even now beginning to ring. Its sound was a great relief to Yussef. He rushed across the room to turn it off so as not to waste the sound and wear the machine out. Then he opened his top dresser drawer. He stood there only in his pajamas, paying no attention to the open window and the cold wind on his sweaty back. There were many things to do before going to this terrible class, but first he must select a pair of socks from one of the many before him: some cotton in white, some black, some blue of artificial material, some in wool with diamond-shape patterns on the sides. One of these pairs, the heavy woolen ones, very expensive, he would wear to a party sometime. He regarded his possessions only a moment, looked quickly left and right, snatched with both hands, and slammed the drawer. He was satisfied that no one had seen him. He sat on his bed and put on a pair of tan woolen socks he had bought a month ago at a very fine store. He had almost forgotten them. Yussef was pleased he had picked them and not others because he was now feeling the cold coming in.

He was not altogether displeased with his room. His father had arranged it, he didn't know how. It was almost impossible to get a single room in a dormitory in the big state university in America. He did not want to live with some dirty Arab though he was Muslim himself. He did not want to live with some foreigner either. God alone knows who they might have put him in with. He would have preferred to live with a woman, but, no, not every day. Anyway, that was another matter. Meanwhile he would live alone. Yes, he preferred it that way. He was careful to lock his door on the way out. Then he unlocked it to see if he had locked it before locking it again. There was no time even for coffee because he had spent too much time brushing his hair, so he went on to his class, bent against the wind.

Yussef had lived in this dormitory since the first week in Sep-

tember with other first-year students, all men from America except himself. He was not well-acquainted with any of them, although they were not unfriendly. The two across the hall invited him in the first week, and he drank with them and some others, but he could remember no one's name the next morning. The liquor, vodka, had made him sick and he felt ashamed. They invited him again but he said he had to study. The truth was that the dormitory was too noisy to study in. There was always loud music and thumping sounds. The blacks upstairs always had ugly jewgirls in their rooms who must stink like old fish. When Yussef got the results of his first tests, three "failures" and an "unsatisfactory," he decided he was too much alone, though this was a womanish feeling and he put it out of his mind as best he could. The classroom was overheated. Yussef felt drowsy. The professor started to speak of next week's assignment in Political Science and Yussef, though he fought against it, fell asleep.

ONE NIGHT Yussef got a phone-call from a man in Omaha, Nebraska. He identified himself as a business associate of his father. His name was Kareem ben Lattif. Yussef recalled meeting him in Iraq three years before, when his father had taken him along to a meeting there. He was a huge man, many inches over six feet, weighing perhaps three hundred pounds. He was much too big. He towered over everybody, especially Yussef. A black upstairs had once addressed him, Yussef, in the hall as "Garo." "Hey, Garo, how you kick 'em, man, soccer style?" He learned later that Garo was the given name of a runtish Armenian professional football player. Yussef wished the black dead in hell. "Your father wants to see you. To see you are safe and well. He also has messages for you. I will pick you up Wednesday at where you live." Yussef wanted to tell ben Lattif that he had a paper to write for Thursday and two quizzes on Friday, but ben Lattif had already hung up. Yussef shrugged and went to the movies and ate three bags of popcorn, the only food in this country that did not constipate him. England had been worse with its filthy pork and mutton from dogs. After the movie, a foolish thing about a girl and a horse and her little brother, Yussef went back to his room and committed a shameful solitary act and then went to sleep, wishing he were in his own country. Kareem ben Lattif arrived almost when he had said he would.

"Your father, may Allah steady his hand, is well. Your mother, I take it, is also well. Your father is concerned that you are wasting your time and money in this country. There are reports that you do poorly in your studies. There is also the matter of bills. He cannot understand two hundred and thirty seven dollars and fifty cents in

two months for socks. He wants to know if you have grown another set of legs. Perhaps the bill is a little sham on your part which would also account for your failure to live up to your scholarly potential. Perhaps you are spending your money on whores and your days sleeping it off."

"I have been in this country now seven months and I haven't had so much as one woman." Yussef thought he would choke on the words. He liked this mountain of fat no better than when he met him three years ago in Bagdad. He was afraid he would lose his temper with him and regret it. He changed the subject to politics while ben Lattif ordered his chauffeur, a black man in a shiny silver-shaded suit, almost as huge as ben Lattif himself, to drive faster. "This is a good automobile, this Mercedes. I rented it and him in San Francisco. There is no need to crawl. At this rate it will take us an eternity to get to Detroit."

"What does Sadat think he is doing?" Yussef asked.

"You do not understand, Yussef. Things have changed. Only a madman wants to bleed to death fighting the Israelis forever. Meanwhile the Israelis do not bleed to death. They have no blood left. One of their own has written that when the world comes to an end there will be only Jews left and they will all be crazy. Let the filthy Russians fight the Israelis. No, Sadat has a brain. Arafat has a rectum where his mouth should be. As for me, I am nearly sixty and getting tired of all this idiocy. My mind is on a Greek restaurant I know in Detroit. And I will also buy you a woman as a gift to bless this visit, to honor your father, my benefactor and my boss."

Yussef felt less hatred for ben Lattif after they had eaten. They had lamb, raw and cooked, rice, grapeleaves, honeyed pastries and coffee. The black and ben Lattif drank three bottles of wine between them, but Yussef said he wouldn't have any. He was ashamed to drink in front of ben Lattif. He was also afraid ben Lattif would tell his father. While the two whispered to each other Yussef played the juke box for the Eastern music, a song of unrequited love. Cheap, vulgar music, but in spite of himself, Yussef's eyes filled up with homesickness. When he felt himself calm again, he turned to go back to the table; ben Lattif and the driver were through with their private talk and were staring at him, both now wearing dark glasses though the sun had set hours ago. Yussef told them they looked like a cartoon in a Zionist newspaper. The black driver laughed. "You a funny little due, Joe. Uncle here and me, we gonna make you happy. We gonna see some nice belly dancers and then we gonna get you some super-fine trim. Get you blewed, screwed and tattooed. Ain't that right, Uncle?"

“TAKE A DRINK, YUSSEF. I swear I will not tell your father. This is the best. Scotch. Wilbur has gone out for some hashish.” Yussef did not answer. The dinner had made him sleepy. Always when he awoke from a nap he was sullen and his head ached. The belly dancers had only made his hands sweat, bringing him no satisfaction. This hotel was big and fancy but also dark and ugly.

“Where are the women?” he said, finally.

“They will be here,” ben Lattif said, smiling. “Wilbur is arranging that too. By the way, you can be a little friendlier to Wilbur. You can trust him. I may take him back with me.”

“Why should he go back with you, ben Lattif? In this country slavery is ended.” Yussef gulped some whiskey, astonished at his own boldness. He saw the older man pale, with anger or some other feeling, he could not tell.

“Yussef, you talk like a maiden aunt. Now who is it who looks like a Zionist cartoon?”

Yussef took another swallow though even the first had made his head buzz, the memory of the vodka still with him. “I do not know what my father wants of me. I did not ask to come to this country. I never wanted four years in England. I was not raised to be bed-fellow to Americans and Jews and infidels. I was not taught to trust strangers. I am not accustomed to getting out of bed at seven in the morning to do the bidding of Jewish professors only to be humiliated when I cannot answer their hateful questions. I am not used to being insulted because my skin is dark, only to be flattered by others for the same reason—a kind of madness in this country. Finally, when I see the world to be other than I thought in many ways, you tell me that times have changed and that I talk like a woman, that I ought to be friendlier to servants. You want to make things well for me? Go back to Tripoli and tell my father to make up his mind what he wants his son to be.”

There was silence from ben Lattif for several moments; then he nodded as if to say yes to something, but he never told Yussef what it was.

Wilbur came in waving a brown paper bag. He had with him four women at least. The next morning Yussef felt the ache in his groin gone, but a headache was stabbing him. In his chest, near his heart, there was a feeling he had never had before, heavy, but not altogether bad. In the spring, after many visits to Detroit by himself, and twice to Toledo, Yussef received word that he was not welcome to continue at the university in the fall. He had flunked out. He thought a rock had broken his skull; ben Lattif would soon be on the phone. He thought of taking a nap, but the idea of his father appearing in his dreams was more than he could bear. He

took a bottle out of his drawer, a half of a fifth of scotch, hidden under his socks, and drank for twenty minutes. He asked himself what he had become: an Englishman, a black chauffeur, a whore-monger, ben Lattif? He shook his head four times to get rid of the bad sights. Then he walked to the station and got the bus to Detroit. From the station there he called Genevieve, one of the whores Wilbur had brought in. He had spent the night with her twice after that. Now he persuaded her to come to his dormitory with him, but it was not easy. He did not want to stay in Detroit. "I come to your place, doll, I make a hundred bucks. I stay here I make five hundred. You got five hundred? That's cool. Meet you in twenty minutes at the Greyhound, hound."

Yussef went to the bar to drink scotch, looking at his watch every three minutes. When Genevieve walked in wearing a white fur-lined coat and black stockings she was a beauty even if she was a whore, her skin especially, which was only a little darker than his own. On the ride back Yussef slept while Genevieve did her nails. His dreams were ugly and he kept waking up. Once he woke up sobbing and couldn't stop. Genevieve held him as his mother had done. "Cut that out, man, you get me cryin' pretty soon. What you cryin' for? Ain't nothin' to cry about. Pretty soon I get all that booze outa you. Cryin' look at you, what you got to cry about, with all your bucks and your fancy socks? Let's see what kind of socks you wearin' today. One of 'em got a hole in it. Ain't that a cryin' shame."

In her arms Yussef, rocking, dreamt that ben Lattif called him to say come back home and he said no.

Meditation

KENNETH A. McCLANE

Snow falls with a myth, not riding
high in the trees, but down
under bark, where the skin
teems with disguises:

And slight wades the afternoon
sun which warms tree-tips: slight
as is anything
which works outward out:

The voice needs to push
outwards from the tightest center:
a baseball woven from its cork: the heart
the only outpouring intelligence.

The Pool

ANNE DANIEL

MR. WEST SAT watching the water in the pool sparkle in the afternoon sun. He was reading a novel that his daughter had brought him from the public library. It was boring in a modern sort of way, but he continued to run his eyes over the words. He could vaguely follow the plot without much thought, and he divided his time between watching the children in the water and reading.

There was, in particular, one child that his gaze followed. His name was Norman and he was still chubby with the dimples of babyhood. Mr. West watched him as he smacked his fists happily against the water. An inflated white plastic doughnut-like apparatus circled each arm and the child could bob up and down though he obviously couldn't swim. Norman paddled in little circles while his Nanny sat on the side of the pool moving her feet and talking to him in a low voice.

Nanny, thought Mr. West, where did that word come from? Surely they don't call them Nannies. Whatever she was called, and she had the slightly swarthy cast that suggested Puerto Rico or South America, she was good at her job and the boy would shriek at her with pleasure as he headed toward the side of the pool. She would speak to him gently and he would chuckle and return to whacking his arms up and down making little wheels of foam. A far different scene, a far different child would appear later, Mr. West knew.

Mr. West came to the pool in the courtyard of his apartment building every afternoon, when normal men were at work. He came and sat and read a book or newspaper and watched the group of young mothers, all slim and tan. They sat at the end of the pool and he could hear their soft laughter. The children, brown from the sun, would race up and down on the concrete, calling to each other and leaping into the water.

It was a world that Mr. West had never known, and he marveled at these young women, children themselves. He marveled at the quick efficiency with which they dealt with children's falls or quarrels or tantrums. He marveled at their idleness and what seemed to be their contentment. He himself had become an idler and something of a spectator, a watcher. He had begun to be alarmed by the

amount of time he spent by the pool, watching.

He had moved into the apartment building about two months ago. In June he had begun to come down in the afternoons after he finished his morning's work. At first he had come so that he wouldn't be alone in the apartment, but the white pool and the blue sky and the golden bodies had become part of his routine and his time had gradually stretched through the afternoon. Every morning he went to the law office where he had been a partner for thirty years. He went only in the mornings to work with old clients. It was not a bad arrangement. The money was good, and it filled part of the day.

He had officially retired a year ago. He and Betty, his wife, had gone on a vacation to Hong Kong for a month. When she became ill, they flew back. She died almost immediately. Her death had come with such quickness that Mr. West had simply gone numb. Now, he tried not to think of her. The move to the apartment had been to be closer to work and away from the old house, the old friends. His daughter had been frantic. "Daddy, you'll die of loneliness and boredom there with all those young couples, and the children will run screaming up and down the halls. You know how you are about children."

Mr. West had been known to snap at a marauding grandchild who had ventured into his study and out again with some private article, a pipe or a magazine he had saved especially. He recognized a certain justice in her remark, but nonetheless he felt a little coolness toward her as he went ahead with his move to the apartment.

So here he was, an alien in a strange country, a country mostly inhabited by young women and children. He had never paid a lot of attention to women. He had married early. He had been a busy, ambitious young man. He needed a wife to see to his needs and tend to the details of his life. Luckily, and he had never been quite sure how, he had picked the perfect woman. She had been loving and efficient and cheerful. He had loved her tenderly for many years. He had not thought to inquire or to wonder about her life, how she filled her days or the long afternoons.

Certainly he couldn't imagine her, or Evelyn, his daughter, spending her time as these young women did, at the end of a swimming pool, kicking the water and gossiping.

Usually around three, they would begin to straggle off, carting children and cushions and towels. One slender blonde would stay after, wrapping her tiny daughters in towels and feeding them oranges at a round table under a green polkadot umbrella. Mr. West found the threesome charming; he tried not to stare.

ON THIS AFTERNOON as usual, the pool gradually cleared and Normie was alone paddling. He looked like a little rubber duck as he floated, talking to himself. There was always a lull before the late afternoon crowd arrived. They would come in singles or couples. A small number of men would gather in a group in one corner. Mr. West had already made his decision about them, though he was not prejudiced, and he watched with interest.

He was reading when a motion by the gate caught his eye. A woman in a purplish dress stood there cooing "Normie, Normie" to the baby in the pool. The Nannie called "Normie" in a sharp voice, and the little head twisted around. The child screeched with delight and frantically splashed his arms in a rush to get to the side of the pool. "Hello, Baby." The figure squatted by him. "Are you glad to see Mommie?" There was a rush to fling himself into her arms, and she fell back under the spray.

Mr. West had first seen her in a brown bathing suit. She was moderately tall with shoulder-length hair which stood in a dark cloud around her head and curved back from a deep arrow in the middle of her forehead. She had lowered herself into the pool and begun bouncing Normie up and down to his shrieks of delight. "Wheee . . . Whee . . ." she had cried, as she swung the child who was becoming more hysterical by the minute in her arms. "Wheee . . . Whee" Her voice was loud, a trifle forced, Mr. West had thought. Then she had begun to swing the boy around in circles.

There had been something unseemly in the little drama: Mr. West felt strangely embarrassed. Her eyes would lift and scan the rows of lounge chairs. She need not have worried. It seemed certain that the eyes of any man present, the small group in the corner excepted, were fixed in her direction. Suddenly she pushed the boy away. "Here Nina, take him: I want to swim." The voice was edged with impatience. Nina emerged from the side and took Normie, who immediately began to scream and wave his hands, while his mother pulled on a peach-colored bathing cap and began to swim.

Mr. West had been completely unprepared for her body in the water. She had pushed off backwards from the side and lain for a moment in the rush of foam. Then she had thrown one arm back over her shoulder. Eyes closed, face concentrated, she glided and then flung the other arm. The blue-white flakes bubbled over her body. Her suit straps repeated the V of her hair line. She was a little clumsy, not really a good swimmer. But as she plunged through the water, Mr. West couldn't help noticing the water tugging down the two sides of her suit top. She lay in the water kicking and flinging her arms heavily, her eyes shut, her face composed, the brown breasts seeming to ripen and grow under his eyes. From where he

sat he couldn't tell whether the bubbles tugging at the brown cups revealed the browner circles of her nipples.

Mr. West turned his head and coughed. The book in his hand was shaking. He considered himself a man of honor, especially where women were concerned. One did not take advantage. He had finished reading a chapter before he looked up again. By that time the three were seated quietly and he forced himself to leave.

By the next afternoon, after a morning going over briefs, he had come back to the apartment after lunch and decided after a nap to go back down to the pool. He was nervous until about three-thirty when Nina and Normie appeared. A little after five she was there in a dress of a variegated print with some sort of shawl and clumsy shoes with wedges and ankle straps. Mr. West supposed that it was all very fashionable, but it was decidedly ugly. She stood with shoulders slumped as if the effort of normal human activity were too much for her.

Later, after her swim, she took off her cap and lay down beside the pool on the cement. She lifted her legs and laid them across the seat of a chair. Normie, who as soon as he saw his mother changed from a docile and happy child to a wild hysteric, rushed screaming toward her the moment she lay down. He crawled across her and sat astride her stomach paddling his arms in their little white water wings.

His mother pouted and pulled Normie's head down to hers, lifting him kicking into the air. Then, she put him firmly aside. "Nina," she called sharply, "Change Normie's suit." Nina picked up the little wriggling body and began pulling off his suit. He squirmed away from her and rushed whooping back to his mother. But she was by then far away and unapproachable. Nina was able to retrieve him while his mother lay, head back, eyes closed, legs spread open, receiving the late afternoon sun like a lover. That night Mr. West tossed in his bed, dreaming wild and extraordinary dreams. He got up, fixed himself a drink and read a news magazine until he felt he had himself under control.

He came upon her another day. He had been at work helping to finish up a particularly irritating and unpleasant case. He had missed his early afternoon sun and the arrival of Normie. He had realized before that the gradual extension of his afternoon sun bath had something to do with Normie and his mother. He had turned it over in his mind examining it from different angles and decided that it was a little foolish perhaps, but harmless enough. Today, however, he had been surprised at his own impatience. He had rushed to change and had loped down the stairs without waiting for the elevator. The flip-flops he had bought at the drugstore in the concrete fortress across the street whacked annoyingly against his

heels. He had to squeeze his toes to keep the slippers from falling off. "I'm too old for this foolishness," he was just thinking. He stopped abruptly.

She was sitting in a lounge chair by the gate. The chair was back and she lay with her knees up. Her head was resting against the back of her chair, her eyes were closed. She had on a lumpy dress, bunched around her throat and those awful, heavy shoes. She was not asleep. She was in that faraway place that drove Normie

He slid into a chair with his back to her. He dared not turn his head to look, and when he finally changed to a seat from which he could see her, she was gone.

Mr. West felt ridiculous as tears rose to his eyes while he gathered his things for the trip upstairs. Suddenly, the spectacle of a sixty-year old man with skinny legs and arthritis in his right shoulder shuffling up the stairs of a concrete prison seemed laughable and pitiable to him. "My God, I'm losing my grip," he thought. He had never thought of how he looked to other people. He had been firm and fair to his clients, honest and forthright with his peers and, aside from occasional bouts of peevishness with his own child and then his child's children, gentle and considerate at home. He had respected his friends and co-workers and they had respected him. He had never questioned that or even thought about it. And now here he was an old man, a foolish old man. As he passed along the clotted yellow carpet to his door, he heard the phone ringing and struggled frantically with the key.

He plunged into the semi-darkness and grabbed up the receiver. His relief was enormous when he heard the safe, calm voice of Herb, an old law school friend. "Yes, Yes. I'd love to come to dinner. No, No. It's not too late. I'll just change and be right over." He was ashamed of the gratitude that welled into his throat and hoped that Herb hadn't noticed his thickened voice. He kicked off the flip-flops in the middle of the living room floor, showered and dressed in the dark, watching the stars and pale evening sky.

FOR THE NEXT WEEK, Mr. West worked all day. He arrived home after the news and had his martini over the paper and a variety of amazingly awful TV shows. He tried a different one each night from the rather stern and righteous news program on Public TV to the game shows and re-runs on the other channels. He did not actually watch them, but finally had to admit to himself that he turned them on for the presence of human voices and forms in the same room. The knowledge made him a little frightened.

And here it was a Friday afternoon late in August. Mr. West was leaving the next day for a two week vacation at the house in Maine. Evelyn and the children would be going with him, or per-

haps he was going with them. He and Betty had always gone for one week alone together of hot sunny days and windy nights along the beach. He had always dreaded the children coming. But now he found himself looking forward to it. He had walked down the stairs with the rubber slippers smacking, found himself a seat over by the wall and waited, reading. Normie's mother had appeared, talked to him and disappeared, walking across the grass toward the building. "Mommie will be back in a minute," she had called to the wailing child.

Friday afternoons seemed to be popular. He usually played golf on Fridays so this was his first experience. There were growing groups of young men as well as young women. There were a few radios, beer and noise. The weekend had clearly already started.

Mr. West leaned back in his chair. When the whoops and shouts from the pool died down for a moment, he became aware that there were whoops and shouts from inside the wall behind him. He cranked his head around and realized that he was looking down into the women's locker room. Someone had pushed open the small window, probably to let some of the steam out, and he had a straight view into the anteroom between the dressing room and the outside door. No one was there, however, and it seemed all right. He couldn't reach the handle from the outside. He certainly wasn't going to shout inside. He could have moved his seat, but that seemed a bit prim. Besides, it was outside the actual dressing room.

Mr. West started awake and looked at his watch. It was after four-thirty. He looked around and saw that Normie and Nina had disappeared. He felt a surge of something like disappointment. Ah well; he sank back into his doze. This time, he was awakened by voices. There was a low knock on a door, and a masculine voice called, "Nan, Nan. Is Normie with you?" The answer came back muted: "Oh Bill, what? Just a minute."

"Daddy! Daddy!" came a familiar shriek.

Mr. West was awake instantly, though his eyes were still closed. He turned his head in the direction of the voice and looked. There she stood; her head, wrapped in a purple towel, was resting against the door. The rest of her brown body was naked. Her heavy breasts sagged against the door while she talked. Clinging to one plump leg was Normie, bare from head to toe and dragging a diaper. He was squalling, "Daddy! Daddy!" at the top of his voice.

Mr. West immediately closed his eyes and turned his head. His first thought was that someone must have seen him. His second thought was that someone else must be looking at her, too. He glanced around. His was the only chair near the window. He waited until the murmur of voices had died and Normie's squealing had moved into the dressing room. The cry was now: "Mommie! Mom-

miel!"

"Good God, the child will grow up to be perverted," thought Mr. West as he looked steadily ahead at the pool. Burned into his mind was the slump of the back curving down into the roundness of her buttocks and those wonderful breasts. His heart was beating fast, and he could feel sweat on his forehead. He didn't dare move. He sat there for an eternity, his heart jumping, and then he could hardly bear to look. The family procession came up the stairs. Normie was dancing around his mother, making little cries and dodging back and forth, running back and patting her and then running forward. She had on some kind of oriental-looking robe which billowed around her as she walked. Behind was the father. He was exceedingly tall and thin and dressed in a seersucker suit. A bit of beard straggled down from his ears. It was a face and posture perhaps European, or Middle Eastern. The voice, Mr. West remembered, had been New England, Boston, perhaps Harvard.

Now he watched the threesome. Nina had vanished to wherever such people go when they are not wanted. Mr. West tried not to stare as they pulled up chairs and settled down at a corner of the pool. She pulled the robe over her head and he could feel rather than see her shaking out her hair and the motion of her arms as she leaned to pick Normie up. "Wheee . . ." she cried. "Wheee." She swung him through the air. She sat on the side of the pool, pulled Normie into her lap and began to talk to him in that cooing voice. "Now does Normie want to swim for Da Da? Oh Da Da would love to see Normie swim." The child wrenched himself from her lap and rushed frantically to his father who was reading the paper. Then he ran back toward his mother and hurtled himself toward the water, to be grabbed in midair, screaming. He began to sob.

Mr. West was filled with rage. "She is ruining that child," he muttered. He snatched up his book and his towel and rushed for the stairs. He hadn't stopped for his slippers, and as he crossed the grass yard, he could feel that he had scraped his heel on the steps. He felt a grim satisfaction at the idea of leaving a bloody trail across the yellow rug.

He went into his apartment, and slammed the door behind him. He threw himself into the chair by the window and sat, trembling. He watched the sky go black, and the lights of the city come up to meet the last of the sun. He could hear the music and laughter from the pool. He watched the squares of light come on in the windows of the far wing of the building. He thought of his wife with a longing that was raw and tearing, as he sat motionless, watching.

He finally stood up and went into the bathroom and carefully washed off his foot. The shelves of the bathroom cabinet were empty

so he hobbled to the liquor cabinet, took out the vodka, and sloshed the clear liquid over his heel, cursing. After he had showered and dressed in neat blue slacks and an open shirt, he went into the kitchen and got out a steak. He had two martinis and watched the news, a quiz show and a ponderous interview between a newsman and a newsmaker. He had his steak and went to bed at ten.

The next morning on the way to Maine, as he drove carefully up the turnpike, he told Evelyn that he had decided to give up the apartment. "Herb says there are some new places out near the club. Maybe you could go with me to look at them," he said to her. He reached over to pat her hand and gave her a small, almost boyish smile.

Critic

OLIVIA BERTAGNOLLI

You talk about the flow of words
as if they formed a river,
the fluency of some small stream
to quench a thirst.
You haven't tasted the words
of this river,
followed the cusp and ripple of light,
the small *t* snags down stream.
You do not look; you do not see clearly
the blank page,
its mouth stitched tight
as a stream in winter.
A river does not shed its skin,
leave behind a mute and silken tongue
like the snake, who forgetting its former self,
coils in the dust and eats words whole.

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Contributors

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